

CHARLES A. MOORE

## *Suzuki: The Man and the Scholar*

Dr. Suzuki's accomplishments in the academic field are legion. No comment on that part of his life is necessary, nor would any statement or evaluation of his tremendous accomplishments and contributions even approach adequacy.

His contributions to learning as such, however, are not really the most significant part of his life's work. His contributions to world understanding, and especially to the mutual understanding of the peoples of the East and the peoples of the West, have been tremendous but are often inadequately appreciated. The contemporary interest in Zen, due almost entirely to Dr. Suzuki's prolific and remarkable writings in that area, has brought about a neglect and even a forgetting of the incredible amount of activity Dr. Suzuki has engaged in throughout his scholarly life of some 70 years with his dominant interest in developing understanding between East and West.

He was one of the very few Eastern thinkers who really understood the West; and he was also one of the very few Easterners who could explain the West to the East without violating the spirit of the West—Western thought, philosophy, and religion. His many-sided explanation of the East to the West is well known—and extremely significant. We must never forget or fail to appreciate this man's unbelievable contributions toward understanding. Those of us in the present day who are dominated by this same concern, the same twofold concern of positively developing understanding and of negatively destroying misunderstanding, owe a great debt of gratitude to Dr. Suzuki for his pioneering and longlasting work for understanding. We may also frankly consider whether or not a

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rather considerable amount of work which is being done at the present time in this same direction would ever have taken root had it not been for his planting the seed long ago and developing that seed into full bloom.

Before returning to the more intellectual side of Dr. Suzuki's life and work at the end of this piece, let us look at Suzuki the man, the person, the friend, for this is a side of this great individual which does not seem to be fully known or appreciated—again because everything about him seems to be lost in the single thought of his exposition of Zen. This is tragic—because the man was a remarkable human being with all the qualities of greatness and with none of the faults. On the basis of a close friendship with Dr. Suzuki for some 27 years, one is rather overwhelmed by the graciousness, the kindness, the co-operation, the friendliness, and the warmth of the personality of this great man.

One quality stands out in this man of greatness which, though, it is characteristic of all the truly great, is often missing in many. This is the quality of humility. Conceit, egotism, undue pride would be unthinkable for him. Of course, he must have been proud of his achievements; anyone would have to be. But the pride that comes from conceit was completely lacking in his personality. Dr. Suzuki obviously thought of his life as a life of work. He was a dedicated person. He worked interminably. Only a remarkable serenity of mind could have enabled this indefatigable man to carry on so very long, so very actively and so very productively under the strains which to any other elderly man would have been devastating.

These are generalities, of course, but they do indicate interesting aspects of the great man being honored in this issue of *The Eastern Buddhist*. But a few more personal items—little things—may also be of interest. They do not necessarily reveal anything significant about Dr. Suzuki the thinker as people throughout the world know him, but they do reveal, more than any generalities, the warmth, the kindness, the personal generosity of Suzuki the man.

My favorite story concerns his arrival in Honolulu for the Fourth East-West Philosophers' Conference in 1964. The officials

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of the airline received advanced notice that a distinguished Japanese philosopher of more than 90 years of age was arriving on a certain plane at a certain time. Expecting a decrepit old man who would surely be unable to manipulate the distance from the plane to his waiting friends, the airline officials provided a wheelchair at the bottom of the stairway leading from the plane. Dr. Suzuki was an old man, to be sure, but was not helpless. He did not need a wheelchair. However, he was quick to sense the situation, and his appreciation of the kindness intended was so instantaneous that he accepted the courtesy and was wheeled into the airport lobby in all the grandeur of a helpless person. All who saw this event realized the spirit of the man revealed through this act, his thoughtfulness in accepting the courtesy which he didn't need, and the obvious satisfaction he gave the airline attendant who sincerely thought he was being of real service. It was something of a humorous situation, of course, but a very touching one, too.

Another interesting incident, a more serious one, occurred during one of the meetings of the Third East-West Philosophers' Conference in 1959. One of the deeply Christian members of the Conference was somewhat disturbed by the Zen failure to think seriously enough about the death and destiny of man the individual and his fate after death. He reminded Dr. Suzuki that he—Suzuki—had failed to appreciate the difference between life and death. Dr. Suzuki replied simply, "Oh, life and death, they're all the same!" The questioner was not pleased, but the rest of the Conference members were highly appreciative and amused—and perhaps somewhat enlightened. It was a "beautiful" example of Zen wisdom and Suzuki's sense of humor.

Another perhaps humorous, and yet somewhat serious, incident that recurred three times over the years was Dr. Suzuki's vow at each one of the East-West Philosophers' Conferences that he would be back for the next one—although nobody present really thought he could be! I personally made the announcement to an overflow crowd who attended his Public Lecture in 1964, quoting Dr. Suzuki as saying that he would be back in 1969, even though he would be

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almost a 100 years old. The response was an ovation, which was most fitting for the courageous man and his indomitable spirit—his refusal even to submit to the eventually inevitable. Most unfortunately, he won't be able to carry out that intention, but the courage and determination and optimism of the man who found those conferences of such value that he felt he had to attend was deeply appreciated by those who heard the announcement. It was thrilling.

One act of his typical kindness occurred at the time of the First East-West Philosophers' Conference, back in 1939. He had accepted the University of Hawaii's invitation to attend and participate—and his participation meant much to the Conference, of course. However, in the meantime, his wife became seriously ill, and all his plans had to be canceled, of course. Nevertheless, realizing how much the Conference needed his contribution to its work, he "came through," despite the difficulties and inconvenience he must have experienced. He wrote his paper and sent it along—a most gracious act of cooperation and typical of the man. It has been called one of the best short expositions of Zen he ever wrote. (It is in the proceedings volume of that Conference: *Philosophy—East and West*.)

There are many stories of the personal thoughtfulness of this great man who was never so lost in his philosophy and never so academically dominated that he lost the personal touch. One story of warmth concerns the "pact" that Dr. Gregg M. Sinclair, President Emeritus of the University of Hawaii, and Dr. Suzuki made at the 1964 East-West Philosophers' Conference, the two vowing to meet in Kamakura to celebrate Dr. Suzuki's 100th birthday. The warm friendship of these two distinguished gentlemen—both longtime workers for East-West understanding—would have been fittingly climaxed by such a meeting and celebration, but, unfortunately, this will have to be a part of unrecorded history.

A rather personal incident may bear mention. In 1963, as Conference Chairman, I had the opportunity and pleasure of visiting Japan, China, and India, to have advanced talks with members of the 1964 East-West Philosophers' Conference about the specific part each was to play in the program of that Conference, and the paper

he was to present at the meeting. I was honored by what I suppose should be called a "tempura party." The food and refreshments were delightful, but even more so was the presence of the great man I had the honor to call a close friend. He "held his own" with all the rest of us in the various "aspects" of the event, much to the delight of everyone present. No one would have suspected that he was a 90-odd-year-old man. He was still young enough—able and willing—personally to enjoy himself in the company of good friends and fellow scholars—regardless of age!

Let us speak briefly of the academic and scholarly side of Dr. Suzuki, not in a technical sense but in an attempt to note situations which reveal the man behind the work.

All too frequently the reaction to Dr. Suzuki's writings takes the form of bewilderment and a failure to understand. All too often this failure to understand leads to the comment that his work is unintelligible, and in the words of thinkers who either can't or won't understand, elicits disparaging comments such as, in the words of one prominent Western philosopher, "That's nonsense." Such a situation does not reflect upon Suzuki but upon the lack of openmindedness and even perhaps the lack of depth of understanding of any but familiar ideas on the part of those who fail to understand.

To the contrary, let me quote a statement made by a distinguished Sinologist, E. R. Hughes, who presented his paper at the 1949 East-West Philosophers' Conference at the meeting following that at which Dr. Suzuki had presented his paper—which was entitled "Reason and Intuition in Buddhism." Dr. Hughes said: "No one who listened to Mr. Suzuki's paper could have failed to be impressed by the scrupulous accuracy and integrity with which he defined his position. From the point of view of an outsider Mr. Suzuki's train of thought was comparable to the feat of tight-rope walking.... Speaking for myself, Mr. Suzuki brought home to me with new force what is to me a plain fact of history, that man cannot dispense with philosophy, and philosophy's first concern is criticism, criticism of appearance, criticism of thought, criticism of language; and, that being so, the philosopher from first to last is dealing with paradoxes,

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some of which may be humanly irresolvable." Anyone who reads Suzuki's works with depth of comprehension and sincerity of intention must be impressed by the "scrupulous accuracy and integrity" with which he always expressed himself—and with the sincerity of the man.

This sincerity was also illustrated at the 1964 East-West Philosophers' Conference. Dr. Suzuki gave a very learned Public Lecture—again to a vastly overflowing audience—on the status of the individual person in Zen. Since his Lecture, like all the others in the series, was being televised and therefore was of necessity limited to precisely one hour in duration, Dr. Suzuki did not really have the opportunity to present his case fully. A less conscientious scholar would have let it go at that—he had done his duty. But not Dr. Suzuki. He voluntarily offered to present a supplementary lecture at a special "Coffee Hour" for the members of the Conference (not the public), so that he could complete his presentation and develop the more technical aspects of his subject. It was a very generous act on his part. And it was a remarkable experience for all concerned. Dr. Suzuki went into the technicalities of Zen with a clarity that was astounding and with a conscientiousness that forced even the most skeptical among those in this audience to rise to a peak of philosophical admiration seldom seen by this writer. It was both a personal and a philosophical triumph for the man who went out of his way—despite possible exhaustion—to give the scholars of the Conference the full benefit of the inner workings of the philosophy which meant so much to him and which, in his dedicated mind, should mean just as much to other scholars as well.

Every great man, in or out of the realm of scholarship, is subject to criticism. There are those who have been critical of Dr. Suzuki's presentation of Zen on the ground that he emphasized certain aspects, especially its irrational tendencies, and underemphasized certain practices involved, especially *zazen* (sitting in meditation). There are short-sighted criticisms, of course, demanding that every scholar cover every aspect of every subject with which he is concerned. Instead, Suzuki undoubtedly felt that the aspect of Zen which he was

presenting was of the essence of the subject and was of most significance, especially for Westerners. To them he was trying to explain what he thought was very basic to the Oriental mind as a whole—in contrast to the Western mind as a whole. This he succeeded in doing remarkably and with integrity.

There are also those who speak of "Suzuki's Zen," implying thereby that the Zen he described is not genuine Zen but only Suzuki's own personal interpretation and therefore of less than complete significance. This is to ignore the tremendous amount of his factual, textual, and fully documented exposition of the basic Ch'an and Zen writings, especially in his three volumes of *Essays*. One would be thoroughly unjustified in calling this "Suzuki's Zen."

However, there is another way to look at this situation, especially with reference to Suzuki's later writings. They reveal two fundamental and valuable facts. One is that Suzuki was openminded enough not to be dominated by the literal, standard, classical formulation of Zen, but to face the study and explanation of Zen with the creativity of the true and significant scholar. The second and much important matter here—and this has been little noted—is that Suzuki in his later years was not just a reporter of Zen, not just an expositor, but a significant contributor to the development of Zen and to its enrichment. Suzuki undoubtedly added to Zen certain insights of his own. He added notions which seem incompatible with earlier writings and with what might be called original Zen—whatever that is! That is not unsound scholarship. Instead, it should be considered in the light of the whole tradition of Oriental philosophy, in which, throughout the ages, succeeding thinkers have added their own creative and original thoughts to the traditional point of view, to its enrichment, to its greater depth and extent of meaning, and to its genuine development beyond the merely traditional interpretation. In later life Suzuki wrote more of what might be called "Suzuki's Zen" than the literal-minded reader might like to find, but this only brings out the fuller possibilities of Zen and, philosophically speaking, this is all to the good. A great man, a great scholar, does not merely repeat the past; he develops and enriches the past by bringing to it the new

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insights of his own genius.

There are also those who constantly remind us that Suzuki was not a Zen Master, as if this automatically undermined the genuineness of his work. This is, at best, a petty criticism and one that should be ignored. It would certainly be ignored by those who know the facts. There is no question of the historical fact that Suzuki achieved enlightenment, that he experienced *satori*. It is said that he still, to his last day, paid homage at the temple where this great attainment took place. But, more than that, Suzuki never claimed to be a Zen Master. He claimed to be a scholar of Zen—and certainly he was that par excellence. A scholar who has spent his life in the study of a philosophy or a point of view may speak with an authoritativeness which seems to imply the assumption of a type of authoritativeness which he might not possess. Suzuki was an authority on Zen. He was probably the most comprehensive and thoroughgoing scholar in the entire history of Zen. But Suzuki was a humble man. He never claimed to be more than he was, a student and a scholar, and certainly he was that beyond the achievements of anyone in the field. (And just think how much less Zen would mean to the world—East and West—were it not for Suzuki's prodigious work and accomplishments.)

Let me mention one more somewhat personal experience. This is the pride which I personally experienced, along with everybody at the University of Hawaii, from the President to every student, when Dr. Suzuki, along with Dr. S. Radhakrishnan and Dr. Hu Shih, was given an Honorary Degree by the University at a very special and most unusual formal ceremony during the 1959 East-West Philosophers' Conference. Here were the greatest individual minds of the three great traditions of Asia. It was an inspiring experience for everybody. The pride felt by those of us at the University of Hawaii who had a part in honoring Suzuki was greatly enhanced by the realization that—tragically—the University of Hawaii was (as I understand it) the only Western university to honor this great man and great scholar and supreme advocate of East-West understanding in the only form that universities can honor such people of great



accomplishment—with an Honorary Degree. We at the University of Hawaii felt that we were being honored in our honoring him.

In conclusion, I would like to add a word about Suzuki and Hawaii. Many great men—political dignitaries, captains of industry, religious leaders—have come to Hawaii and have received Hawaii's well-known hospitality. This is always genuine and frequently overflowing hospitality. But no foreign visitor to Hawaii has been taken to Hawaii's heart so deeply as was Suzuki. He visited Hawaii several times. He always gave of his time and talents unstintingly. And the people of Hawaii—scholars at Conferences, thousands of members of the general public who attended his lectures, individuals who sought out his advice and help, students, faculty members, and hundreds of Buddhists—all adored him. Respect, admiration, even reverence are not enough. We all loved the man—and we think he liked us, and that adds greatly to any sense of great personal loss at his passing.